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ABSTRACT

A ethnographic study examined the ways a young child's mind grasps the idea of the written word. The 5-year-old subject, called "Craig" in this article, had an unending thirst for print, read at the second grade level, and had fluent speech and vocabulary. Craig was followed over the previous 8-month period from the time he first gained manual dexterity with the use of a writing instrument through his present development with invented spelling strategies. His artwork and writing samples were collected from daycare, preschool, and home settings. His progress in written language can be documented through his development in the following areas: (1) graphic formation of upper and lower case letters; (2) graphic formation of numbers; (3) use of appropriate directionality in writing words; (4) appropriate spacing of letters and words; (5) use of initial and final consonants in invented spelling; (6) representation of many sounds and surface features in words; (7) use of visual memory; and (8) beginning development of standard spelling. Findings suggest that spelling is developmental and that the invented spelling process results from children's natural encounters with print. (RS)

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Craig, The Writer: Emerging Literacy Through Inventive Spelling

by

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Craig, The Writer: Emerging Literacy Through Inventive Spelling

by

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"Brrm, brrm, brrm" was the sound during the endless scooter rides around the block. At every driveway was a pitstop where a never ending dialogue was intermingled among the motor sounds.

"Whazat?"
"A."
"Whazat?"
"Z."
"Whazat?"
"P."
"Whazat?"
"2."
"Whazat?"
"H."
"Whazat?"
"4."

The questioner was "Craig," an eighteen month old toddler who had a fascination with license plates. Little did I know that by the end of the summer, instead of asking the questions, he would be answering the questions because he could recognize all 26 letters of the alphabet as well as the numbers from 1 to 10.

In this child study I examine Craig, now 5 years 10 months, as he developed as a writer who used invented spelling. I will chart his growth over eight months as he first gains manual dexterity with the use of a writing instrument through his present development with invented spelling strategies. My purpose for addressing this writing development is to attempt to understand the way a young mind grasps the idea of the written word.

Review of the Literature

The interest in invented spelling began in 1971 with Charles Read and Carol Chomsky. Chomsky suggested "that allowing and encouraging such inventive spelling is a natural beginning step in learning to read, and should precede instruction in recognizing words written by others" (Wood, 1982, p. 707). Now, nearly twenty years later, the research in this area has produced an enormous body of literature on spelling development and the interrelatedness of writing and reading.

Invented spelling refers to the emergent readers' spelling of words using symbols they associate with the sounds they hear in words they wish to write (Clarke, 1988, p. 282). Knowing that language is learned as a constructive, developmental process, we should expect a young speller "2 SPEL LIK A CHIL NOT LIK A AD DULT" (Gentry, 1987, p. 10).

In her article on invented spelling, Lutz (1986) quotes Charles Read on this topic. "Learning to spell is not a matter of memorizing words, but a developmental process that culminates in a much greater understanding of English spelling than simple relationships between speech sounds and their graphic representations" (p. 742). This developmental process, if invented in the context of writing, is both natural and predictable (Gentry, 1987). By allowing children to use their knowledge of

language to invent spelling and by allowing them to trust their own ears and their own judgments, inventive spelling can naturally develop as a dynamic and complex thinking process.

Emerging spellers need to invent because the process of inventing makes them think and learn. Although all children are individuals and progress at their own rates, Lehr (1986), Wood (1982), Gentry (1987), and Hall and Hall (1984), suggest five stages of inventive spelling.

1. PRECOMMUNICATIVE - The child uses symbols from the alphabet to represent words, but appears not to know about letter-sound correspondence. Random orderings are produced of whatever letters the child is able to recall (e.g., KRGOSID for "mommy").
2. SEMIPHONETIC OR PREPHONETIC - The child uses letter combinations to represent words. This stage represents a primitive concept of the alphabetic principle, a linking of letter to sound (e.g., U for "you").
3. PHONETIC - The child begins to represent all surface features of a word according to the child's hearing and articulation (e.g., KOM for "come").
4. TRANSITIONAL - The child begins to rely on visual and morphological strategies rather than sound. Familiar spelling patterns are often used inappropriately (e.g., EGUL for "eagle").
5. CORRECT OR STANDARD SPELLING USAGE - The child is aware of English spelling rules.

Through a series of inventive spelling strategies discussed in the results section, children emerge as spellers along a developmental continuum of written language. Children who are encouraged to use invented spelling gradually adopt appropriate symbols for sounds and progress to traditional spelling as they are exposed to and become aware of the written language (Clarke, 1988).

Methodology

Craig, a young boy age 5 years, 10 months, could easily be nicknamed the "questioner" or the "perfectionist." He is of average height and build with short, brown hair and green eyes. His smile is ever present with a heart-melting dimple carved into each cheek. He has one younger brother, age 3 years, 7 months. Craig also has had an unending thirst for print since he was an infant. He began reading at age four and is currently reading at a second grade level. His vocabulary and speech are very fluent. His behavior may be characterized as that of a perfectionist. Everything has its time and place and is centered around time.

The methodology for this child study was centered around a collection of Craig's artwork and writing samples. The collection began in September 1989, when Craig was 4 years, 10 months, and continued until he was 5 years, 5 months. The collection was started to observe the growth of a young child's emerging literacy through the use of inventive spelling in written language.

Samples were collected from three different settings in Craig's life: daycare, preschool, and home. The home setting contained several structured writing activities including the following:

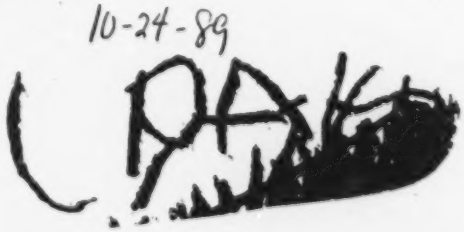
1. Easel painting and writing.
2. Drawing pictures and labeling with print.
3. Written question and answer conversations.
4. Cooperative story writing, with open-ended sentences to complete.
5. Making grocery lists.
6. Playing Scrabble.
7. Transcribing Mother Goose rhymes.

Writing samples were collected weekly, usually in Craig's home setting. The atmosphere was very relaxed and nonthreatening, and Craig was very receptive to all activities presented. His work was reviewed chronologically with an eye focused on the change and development of his written language.

Craig, The Writer

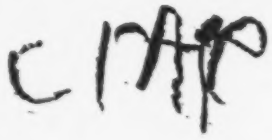
Craig's fine motor skills, especially the handling of writing instruments, started to blossom at the time this study began. The first sample of Craig writing his name was taken on 9-12-89. Notice the beginnings of letter formation but with little emphasis on directionality or spacing.

Five samples of Craig's name-writing were obtained during September and October 1989. The development of all five capital letters, C-R-A-I-G, can clearly be observed in the following example. Up to this point, 10-24-89, CRAIG was the only written word attempted.

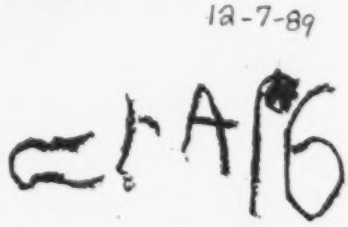


The next sample (see page 5), obtained on 11-14-89, shows his second written word, CORY, Craig's brother's name. This is also the first time a lower-case "r" is seen in his name, possibly as a response to seeing his preschool teacher write it.

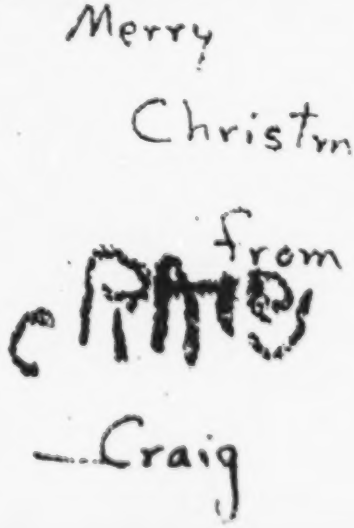
The formation of the capital "G" is still giving Craig some trouble as seen in this sample taken on 11-28-89.



But, by 12-7-89, all five letter formations are very clearly written and from this point on continue to be.



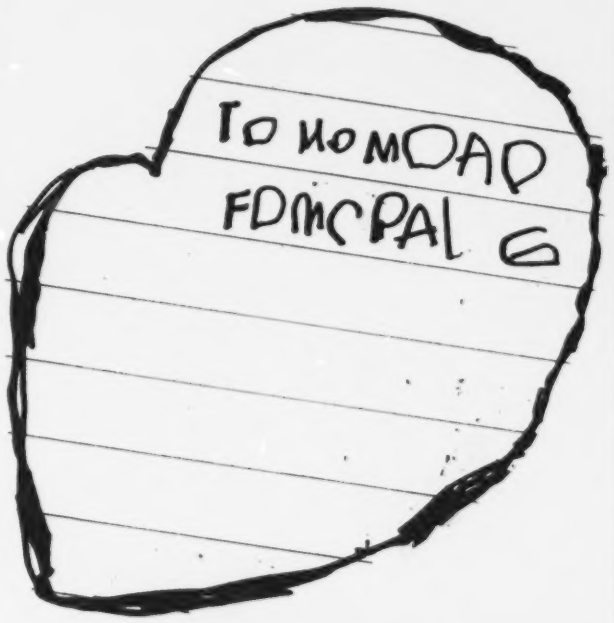
The end of December 1989 shows another new feature in Craig's writing—the incorporation of the lower-case "g." Notice that the teacher's printing of "Craig," written below the child's text, contains a lower-case "g."



11-14-89

The next writing sample, collected on 1-10-90, was copied from a large piece of easel paper. At this point it is important to notice Craig's use of only proper nouns that have an emotional attachment for him (Cindy is mom, Marv is his dad, Mike is his uncle, and Cory is his brother). The words "Craig," "Cory," "Mom," "Dad," and "Mike" were written correctly from memory. While writing the words Cindy, Marv, and Grandma, Craig asked for the spelling, but he knew how to make all the letters independently. At this point the correct letters and correct spelling were very important to Craig.

Craig's first use of inventive spelling occurred spontaneously on his easel on 1-25-90. His valentine heart was written "TO MOM DAD FOM CRAIG." This was my first sign that the concept of letter-sound correspondence was beginning to develop.



It was at this point that I began more structured writing activities to further analyze Craig's inventive spelling knowledge. In one written question-answer dialogue session on 1-25-90, Craig wrote his address and phone number for the first time, which he had committed to memory (775-6873; GR "Grand Forks;" 901 S11ST). Craig independently read all of my written questions, either silently or aloud, before writing his response.

What is your telephone number?

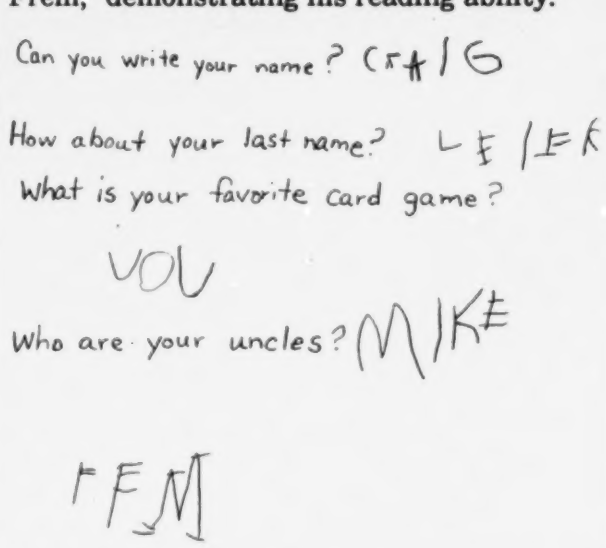
7756873

What is your address?

901S11ST

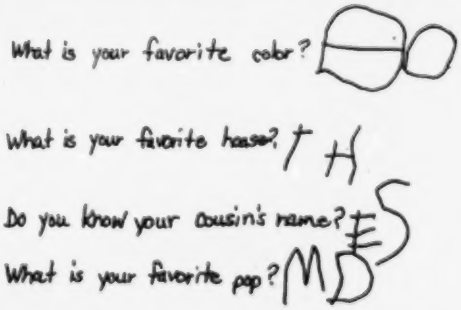
What town do you live in?

In the dialogue obtained on 1-27-90, Craig used inventive spelling to write his favorite card game UOU for "Uno." He also wrote the name of his uncle Fred, but when he wrote FEM he said, "That's not Fred, that's Frem," demonstrating his reading ability.

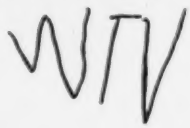

Can you write your name? CRAIG
How about your last name? LEIFER
What is your favorite card game?
UOU
Who are your uncles? MIKE
FEM

Craig's first written sample that was more than a single isolated word was taken on 1-27-90. Notice that he did not copy "love," but rather invented the spelling as he was thinking about the phrase.

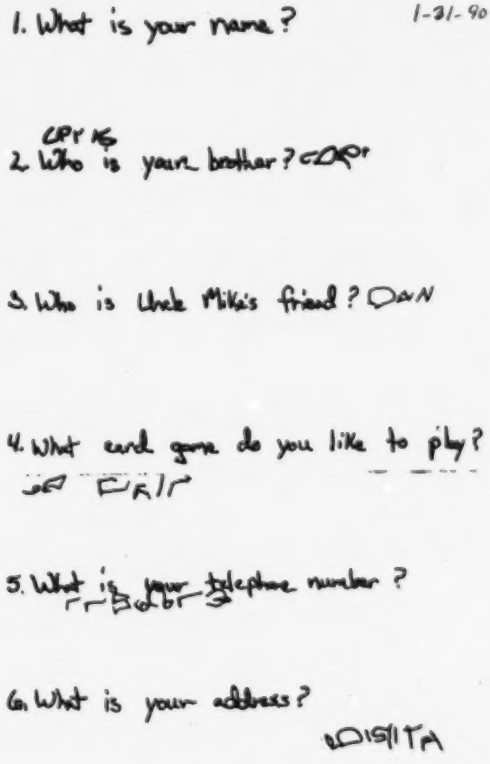
By the end of January, Craig began to incorporate an inventive spelling strategy by using initial consonants. In this dialogue, Craig dictated the question, "What is your favorite house?" (Bo-Blue; TH-this house; ES-Erik, Scott; MD-Mountain Dew; WTV-watch TV).



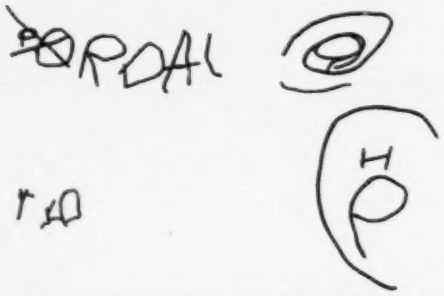
What are you going to do tomorrow?



Another interesting feature was observed on 1-31-90 on a sample taken by his Uncle Mike. In this written question-answer dialogue, narrow-lined paper was used and Craig wrote all of his responses carefully between the lines. Because of the space the legibility of the letters suffered, but the content and knowledge was still there.


1. What is your name? 1-31-90
2. Who is your brother? CRAIG
3. Who is Uncle Mike's friend? DAN
4. What card game do you like to play?
UNO
5. What is your telephone number?
6. What is your address?
ERIK

In the beginning of February another inventive spelling strategy using initial consonants, final consonants, and other surface features to represent written words was observed on a grocery list written by Craig (ROAL-roll; CHP-chip; TKO-taco).



This strategy continued to develop throughout February, and on 2-26-90 a cooperative story written by Craig and his mother (see example below) contained the following invented spellings.

PKIE - park
SLEL - seal
GOFSMALOIT - Go find me a lion.
SLLE - seal
hiPPO - hippo
MOKEI - monkey
ELE—t - elephant
TEEGR - tiger

During the creation of this story some interesting spoken dialogue occurred between Craig and his mother. Notice that when Craig wrote "seal" he invented the spelling in two different ways: SLEL and SLLE. But when Craig wrote "hiPPO" he said, "I'm gonna write hippo the way you did, Mom," and proceeded to copy the print from line one.

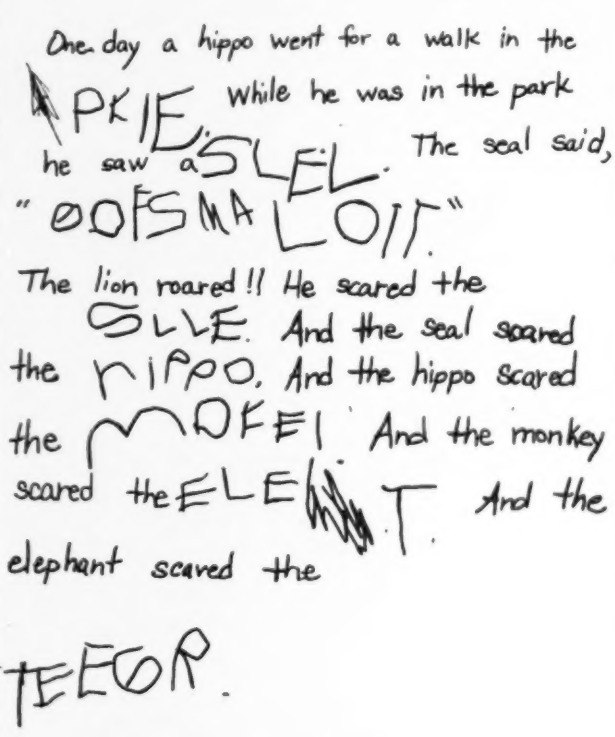
When Craig wanted to write "elephant" the following exchange occurred.

"I can't write elephant."

"Sure you can! Just listen to how it sounds. L..."

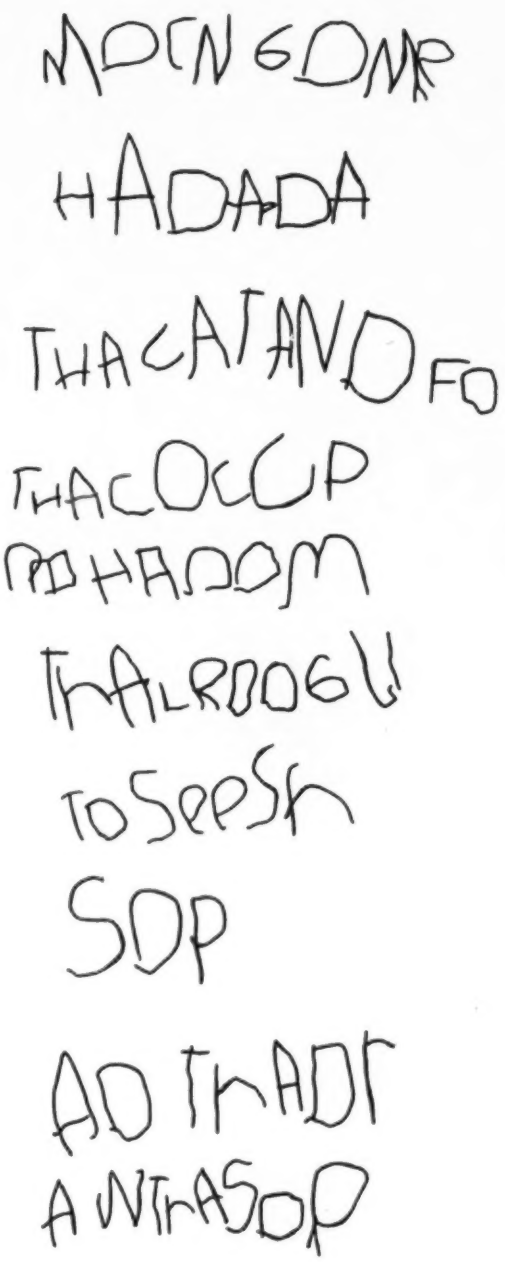
"Elephant doesn't start with "L," Mom, it starts with "E." Then Craig proceeded to write ELE, a series of frustrated scribbles, and the final consonant "T."

At this point in Craig's progress it appears that he is using cues from his visual memory to aid in his writing. MOKEI (monkey) and TEEGR (tiger) contain many surface features present in the conventional spelling of these words.


One day a hippo went for a walk in the
PKIE While he was in the park
he saw a SLEL. The seal said,
"GOFSMALOIT"
The lion roared!! He scared the
SLLE. And the seal scared
the hiPPO. And the hippo scared
the MOKEI And the monkey
scared the ELE T And the
elephant scared the
TEEGR.

In her article "OAD MAHR GOS and Writing with Young Children," Hall (1985) demonstrates a writing strategy that is useful in helping children use and develop their invented spelling strategies. By using texts that children are familiar with, such as Mother Goose rhymes, children can write poems or rhymes that are relatively short and easy for them to remember.

The text that follows was created by Craig on 4-1-90. By using the strategy suggested in Hall's (1985) article, the Mother Goose rhyme "Hey, Diddle Diddle" was created from memory. The text reads:

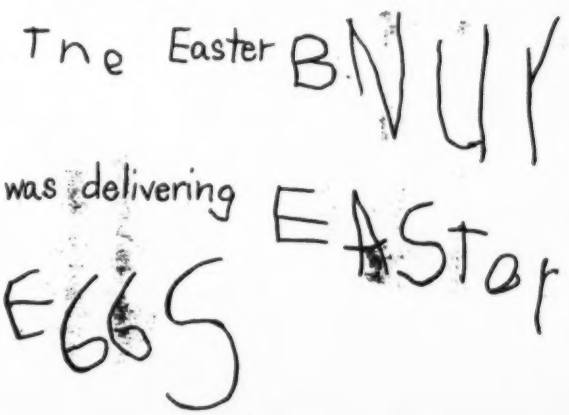


MOCNGDMR (Mother Goose)
HADADA (Hey, Diddle Diddle)
THACATANDFO (The cat and (the) fiddle)
THACOJUP (The cow jumped)
OTHAOOM (Over the moon)
ThALRDOGLI (The little dog laughed)

TOSeeSh (To see such)
SOP (Sport)
ADThADr (And the dish ran)
AWThASOP (Away with the spoon)

By analyzing this piece it is clearly visible that Craig's writing and spelling strategies have blossomed immensely in just seven months. Considering the five stages of inventive spelling discussed earlier, it appears that Craig is currently fluctuating among many stages. The title "MOCNGDMR" appears to contain random letter orderings corresponding to the Precommunicative stage, although the use of the initial consonants M and G suggest a higher level of inventive spelling knowledge. In terms of the Semiphonetic or Prephonetic stage, the use of letter combinations to represent words and the linking of letter to sound would certainly fit into this piece of writing. Every word is represented by a letter or a combination of letters. In many instances, however, Craig appears to be writing from the Phonetic stage, the representation of all surface features of a word. Examples include HA, THA, CAT, AND, DOG, TO, SEE. An interesting consistency observed in this piece of writing is the word THA (the) which Craig spelled the same way six different times. Just two weeks earlier Craig spelled "the" as (TEA).

On 4-12-90, just eleven days after "HADADA" was written, this sample was taken.



Even though Craig only wrote four words in this piece the growth is still evident. Notice how the inventive spelling of "the" first written as TEA, then THA, has finally reached the standard spelling. BNuY (bunny) represents all surface features of the word and also incorporates the lower-case "u" for the first time. EASTer was copied from line one, but EGGS was written independently from visual memory.

Conclusions and Implications

Craig's progress in written language can be documented through his development in the following areas:

1. Graphic formation of both upper and lower-case letters
2. Graphic formation of numbers
3. Use of appropriate directionality in writing words
4. Appropriate spacing of letters and words
5. Use of initial and final consonants in invented spelling
6. Representation of many sounds and surface features in words
7. Use of visual memory
8. Beginning development of standard spelling

This child study holds many implications for parents and teachers. Because Craig will be starting kindergarten this fall, it seems appropriate to make suggestions suitable and beneficial to a kindergarten classroom.

1. In the school setting Craig will need to be challenged to maintain and motivate his interest. Plenty of reading and writing materials should be available and within easy access.
2. The dictation of stories should be utilized. This writing can then be used as reading material.
3. Letters and words should be presented in meaningful contexts, not in the isolation fashion common to worksheets.
4. Because of Craig's developed reading skills, the use of Craig as a model in partner reading would be beneficial to Craig and other children.
5. Shared writing experiences would also benefit Craig.
6. The utilization of kindergarten pals, where young children are matched with an older classroom for various curriculum activities, would help Craig develop socially as well as motivating and challenging him.
7. The last and possibly most important implication for teachers and parents is that they accept the invented or approximate spelling of Craig's beginning attempts at writing.

Spelling is developmental and the "invented spelling" process results from children's natural encounters with print. Parents and teachers should focus on the child's emerging ability to compose through writing and never let an overemphasis on spelling interfere with the composition process. Through reading and writing in supportive contexts, children develop "naturally" as readers and writers.

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